

camper on attention/distraction

This message is not about migrating the list to Facebook, or anything like that, but was occasioned by the fact that we have had a huge number of posts on that topic, showing how much interest the single word "Facebook" can generate on this list, and by Brooks's comment that for his students, email is just soooo old! (Well, he didn't say that exactly, I know.)

Additionally, I've read that Facebook introduced its own email system because it found that for its youngest users email was just too hard to deal with -- the question of the subject line, for example.

It has often been observed that, in the face of new media, the nature of attention has changed radically in recent decades. Television channel flipping would be an early example, as would growing up in a household where the television is always on. Since television, we have moved more and more toward shorter and easier to send forms of communication whose products also seem to me to be able to contain less and less material of any, um, intellectual interest. Just take a look at typical wall of Facebook posts to see what I mean. I have no objection to anyone's having fun posting pics of one's life, but for many, this seems to have become a dominant activity in terms of energy and effort and time. The way many use texting today, it serves as a continual interruption.

Now consider some of the key masterpieces of our particular branch of art, avant-garde film: "The Art of Vision," "La Region Centrale," "La Raison Avant La Passion," "Unsere Afrikareise," "The Chelsea Girls," "The Lead Shoes," "Carriage Trade," "Wait," "Hapax Legomena," "Eniaios." These are all works that, like the finest literature, like Bach's "The Art of the Fugue" and other great works of classical music, like a painting by Paul Cézanne (but unlike many postmodern art exhibits today) require prolonged, sustained, serious attention. They are based on, and depend on, a rather serious model of individual consciousness, in which the mind of the maker (and, the maker hopes, the viewer) is seeking, profoundly alone, to navigate its way through the world, or through ideas about the world, or through some alternative world, or through ideas about cinema and other media. This is art with the power to change the way one sees, to change one's life, and even, if more than a few would "get" it, to change the world.

Are such works, and the ideas behind such works, becoming less and less accessible to those weaned on Facebook and texting and Twitter? Will a new kind of art emerge from this culture of interruption and inattention? Has it already? Is there anything in it that I would recognize as "art," in terms of offering both aesthetic pleasure and a model for consciousness? Of course I'm not sure that any of these questions have answers, so feel free to offer no response. To be honest, though, my gut prejudice is to fear that Facebook, texting, and Twitter are turning us away from the whole idea of a solitude in which the mind struggles to understand itself and the world, and perhaps tries to remake itself and the world, in favor of the mind instead as one interdependent cell in a beehive that produces a lot of

noisy buzz and not much honey.

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Avant-garde film, Facebook, and the nature of attention

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